

Interpreting Untouchability

The Performance of Caste in Andhra Pradesh, South India

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The performance of a living caste purana is outlined for the light it throws on its “Untouchable” owners’ placing in the world of their own caste identity as Madigas. This is shown as taking the form of a confrontation between the Madiga and the Brahman, the former seeking to undermine the claimed superiority of the latter. Going beyond this, it calls on cosmogonic traditions emphasizing the female Shakti and making secondary and junior the great male gods of contemporary Hinduism. Madigas’ practical importance to others in relation to leather and to performing, and the relationships resulting, are emphasized. An embraceable caste identity at odds with sheerly negative conceptions of “the Untouchable” is constructed. The problematic aspects of Madiga identity are not ignored; exclusion, Untouchability and poverty are accounted for, but contextualized within powerfully positive elements. It is suggested that this should not be seen immediately as an answer to outsiders’ questions but, in a Geertzian spirit, as a chance to analyse a complex and changing story that people tell themselves about themselves.

In the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh members of a small caste, Chindu by name, act out a confrontation between Jambava, the first ancestor of Madigas, and “Brahman.”¹ Madigas are one of the two major, formerly “Untouchable” caste clusters or blocs of linked endogamous groups of this region. Their main traditional occupations have been focused on leather. Chindus are not themselves leather workers; they are performers with the right and duty to perform for village communities of Madigas as part of their hereditary occupation.

The confrontation of the “Untouchable” and the Brahman, at first sight the key feature of the performance, displays the centrality and opposition of these two sections of Indian society which DUMONT (1980) so memorably represented as at the root of

¹The research reported in this paper was carried out as part of an Economic & Social Research Council project on “Popular Performance and Social Change in Indian Society” (R000239063). Their financial support and practical assistance are gratefully acknowledged, as also the support of the University of Hyderabad at which it was based, and in particular its Department of Sociology.

the caste system and which DELIÈGE (1989, 1993) has found repeatedly juxtaposed in his important investigation of Untouchable caste myths. Here, however, the phenomenon offered for examination is significantly different to the caste myths which have been used as a route into understanding the Untouchable “mode of thought” in addressing the predicament of exclusion, discrimination and exploitation (DELIÈGE 1993: 534, 546–47; See also CHARSELEY 1998: 61–62). A living caste purana here provides a complex of richly contextualized and related stories and contentions, presented by those for whom they are directly significant and to informed and for the most part personally involved audiences. It contrasts, that is to say, with the evidence hitherto available, episodes at best extracted from such larger narratives, often elicited in response to outsider’s puzzles, or even perhaps casually encountered in different contexts and periods. Already familiar episodes often appear, but far more of the essential contextual basis for their interpretation is delivered with them. The task of interpretation is not simplified; on the contrary, the illusion of simplicity that may accompany homogenized notions of “the Untouchable” as the epitome of deprivation is dispelled. This paper has a limited aim therefore. It seeks to summarize the contextualizing whole and draw out some implications for the understanding of Untouchability in general from this particular group’s worked-out response to their own situation. The ways the performance moves beyond — and behind — its apparent starting point in the confrontation of the Brahman and the Untouchable become clear.

A longer standing agenda of research into the nature and effects of “Untouchable” as a label lies behind the discussion here (CHARSELEY 1996, 1998; CHARSELEY and KARANTH 1998). I have argued elsewhere that, though it was grounded in ancient ideas and practices of pollution and exclusion which are appropriately termed Untouchability, as a label for a major section of the Indian population as a whole it was constructed only in the twentieth century. It came then — it is important to note that this was from perspectives external to the groups concerned — to override in official and then academic discourses the diverse individual caste identities of those it embraced. Of these the major kinds were those based on traditions of agricultural labor and service to farming families, of leather trades, and of “sweeping” or sanitary work. The scope of the label, and its force, were largely the product of campaigning, mobilization, and legislating in the twentieth century, establishing key elements of the legal, political, and social order of postcolonial India. Hitherto entirely separate caste clusters and individual castes were consolidated — in aspiration if not in reality — into a single section of society. The classification has always been motivated by liberal and humanitarian intentions and has been of immense value for the lives of many. On it was built the vast apparatus of positive discrimination or affirmative action attached to the official designation “Scheduled Caste.” It has derived its power largely,

however, from a characterization that is two-edged. Those so labelled have been identified as victims of an iniquitous social order, exclusively victims with absolutely nothing of which they could be proud. A prime significance of this caste purana, and a basic reason for displaying it here, is in providing a forceful reminder of a previous and here persisting order in which the sheer negativity of the Untouchable category had yet to take hold, in which, in varying degree, the castes so reduced were able to distinguish their identities with pride. What emerges is a worldview which does not seek to explain away the discrimination under which they labor but contextualizes it and focuses on presenting an embraceable identity.²

MADIGAS, CHINDUS, AND THE JAMBA PURANAM

Today's association of leather-working with chappals, the characteristic Indian form of leather footwear, often obscures the former importance of leather items in irrigation, farming, cattle husbandry, transport, and many manufacturing processes. In a world where technological substitutes had yet to be developed, leather goods were of immensely greater significance. The tanning of animal skin to produce leather transforms a messy, smelly, and rapidly decaying substance into one that can be experienced as sweet and clean and of great utility. It is one of humanity's major historic technological transformations, along with the smelting of metal. In India, complex values related to cattle, the main source of the skin, generated a problem but did not prevent the development of a major industry carried on in almost every village and town across the land. Profitability of leather has at times balanced ideas of religious pollution associated most strongly with its basic production process and made leather-related castes one of the major sections of the population, the most numerous and best known being the Chamars of North India (BRIGGS 1920, COHN 1990, KHARE 1985). For the South, the great family of Telugu leather-related castes has been analyzed in a small but pioneering volume by T. R. Singh as one of a number of "constellations" of castes (SINGH 1969, 31). Madigas, as represented here by Jambava, a first ancestor, are a large central caste in the constellation and they have other small "satellite castes," sometimes regarded as sub-castes, attached to them. Apart from Madigas in villages

²ILAIHA's *Why I am not a Hindu* (1996) drew widespread attention to the possibility of non-Brahman perspectives attributing positive value to the achievements and traditions of castes normally regarded as "low." At the same time, the Madiga Dandora movement was proclaiming the caste's identity as never before in Andhra Pradesh and mobilizing impressively in pursuit of a caste-wise revision of government provision for Scheduled Castes (BALAGOPAL 2000). These events were significant in shaping the research on which the present study is based.

collecting cattle carcasses, tanning the skins to make leather, and then producing items of everyday local use from it, other castes of the constellation specialized in tanning, in high quality manufacturing of particular articles — with the repair of footwear so familiar in the recent past as a generally available fallback — and in the trading of skins, leather, and finished products. The importance of leather and the secure livelihoods to be obtained from it meant that even leather workers based in villages might support satellite castes operating over wider areas, amongst them the Chindus and other performing castes to be noted.³

The caste myth (*kula purānam*) here is focused on Jambava, or often Jambavamuni, the ancestral Madiga, and is generally termed the Jamba Purana. Such myths and their hereditary tellers are well known by and for many castes in Andhra Pradesh (SUBBACHARY 2000, 2001; compare SHAH and SHROFF 1959; Das 1968). Madigas are distinctive here only in having several different groups owning and telling their own versions of the caste myth in their own ways. Apart from the Chindus, on whose version this paper focuses, there are Nulakachandaiahs, who are caste gurus, keepers of legal records and genealogies, as well as narrators. There are also Dakkalis, Baindilas, Asadis, and Masthis, each with their distinctive — but changing — specialisms. Versions from all these have been recorded but only a Chindu text, to be discussed here, has been published.⁴ The Chindus are performers of yakshaganas (*yakṣagānam*), an ancient genre of musical theatre with stories drawn from the major epic traditions, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and the puranas. These have taken oral and, from ancient times, written forms. Puranas were defined as early as the fifth century CE as dealing with five themes: genesis, destruction and regeneration, genealogy, cosmic cycles, and dynastic histories (COBURN 1984, 21). The list remains usefully indicative of the content of this Jamba Purana. Yakshagana is one of the ways in which the puranic tradition lives on, if now more strongly in some regions of India than in others.⁵ In the area in question, Chindus are one of two small castes with performance of this kind as their specialism; there are also numerous amateur troupes of enthusiastic yakshagana performers, Madigas prominent amongst them.

This wealth of explicit, complexly developed, and expertly delivered discourse on caste origins and identity contrasts, as noted above, with the impression hitherto given

³This is a different and non-Brahmanical conception of the phenomenon on which MOFFATT (1979) was subsequently to focus his debate-inducing notion of “replication.” See also DELIÈGE 1992.

⁴Professor J. Tirumala Rao of Telugu University has a major Dakkali text already printed but not so far circulated or published.

⁵Yakshagana flourished in court circles in the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and subsequently developed rather differently in the Telugu, Tamil, and Karnataka regions (SATYANARAYANA 1983, 151–52, 439–41; Rao and SHULMAN 1991; BAPAT 1998).

by the literature on Untouchable caste myths of individual stories, often fragments weakly remembered and casually told. Here they reveal themselves as substantial ideological and artistic resources, surprising if their “Untouchable” owners and tellers are thought of merely as devalued objects of deprivation and discrimination.

The Chindu treatment of the Jamba Purana in yakshagana style is generally known amongst performers and audiences as Gosangi Vesham (*goṣāṅgi vēsam*). Vesham signifies a made-up and costumed role, here in the first place and most obviously Jambava, the Madiga first ancestor. Its performance involves dialogue, song, and dance with accompanying musicians. Amongst the components of the Jambava role that will be noted is, however, the power to pacify the enraged goddess through his dancing. This identifiable and, as it turns out, separable role within a role is Gosangi. In the narrative of the performance it is passed on from Jambava to his Chindu son and hence to the Chindus as a whole. They, as performers by caste, are providing the player for the Jambava role, as well as for the other roles required, Brahman, and whatever supporting characters may appear in the performance known as a whole by this title, Gosangi Vesham. The name Chindu, which here represents the caste, means also the dance steps which are a key part of the Gosangi performance. From this association the caste itself may also be called Gosangis.

Though its style is closely linked to yakshagana, Gosangi Vesham is distinguished from it in several important ways. Chindus are not summoned to perform but follow their own programme of visits to a series of villages in which they have rights (*mirāsi*) of support and performance. They stay for several days, at first performing overnight as is usual for most village performances. On the last day or possibly two days of their visit they perform instead in the daytime, first Gosangi Vesham and then Yellamma Vesham. The central *vesham* or role in the latter is of the living idol of a goddess with whom Madigas have a special but not exclusive relationship. Yellamma herself, a popular goddess to whom animal sacrifice is directed, is vividly described in the Gosangi Vesham but does not appear there. When she does appear subsequently, she is played by a female Chindu performer and becomes the object of worship (*pūjā*) in a procession from house to house around the Madiga area and beyond.⁶ The two performances together become a forceful assertion, directed both to Madigas themselves and to other villagers more generally, of the special significance of Madigas. Through Yellamma, their importance for the religious interests of many other villagers is displayed; through the Gosangi Vesham, they assert Madigas’ cosmic significance,

⁶Others are frequently possessed in her presence, but she herself is not. It is therefore more appropriate to regard her as performing the goddess role than as embodying her in any more radical sense.

practical importance, learning, and piety in the face of everything for which the Brahman tradition, in their perception of it, stands.

THE GOSANGI VESHAM

The content of the living purana has now to be outlined, drawing on two main sources, both from Nalgonda District of Telangana, the north-eastern region of Andhra Pradesh. One is a village performance observed, recorded and videotaped in March 2003, the other a published Telugu text (VENKATESWARLU 1997)⁷. In addition, an as-yet unpublished paper and discussion with its authors have brought in a wider range of experience (REDDY and HARISCHANDRA 2002).⁸

Preparations for the village performance took place at the house of the Madiga leader of a yakshagana troupe in a village of about four thousand people, one hundred and forty kilometers from the state capital Hyderabad.⁹ The Jambava himself was the main focus of attention, his costume and make-up heavily laden with explicit symbolic reference (REDDY and HARISCHANDRA 2002). Two subsidiary performers, playing members of high and low status trading castes, Komati and Balija, and the other main protagonist, Brahman, joined him. Four *dappu* drummers arrived,¹⁰ led by one of the two elders of the Madiga community. Their first task was to deliver Komati and Balija to the performance space at a street corner in the neighboring section of the village belonging to the Goud or Toddy Tapper caste.¹¹ Once arrived and already attracting an audience, the two played out a short comedy of interactions between themselves and a farmer character in everyday dress. Such supporting caste *veshams* — performances of stereotypical caste roles — are usual, but the particular choice was unexpected and

⁷This was derived from a performance set up for recording in 1994. The performers were selected members of local troupes and the version offered appears to have been thought out in terms of the perceived audience and purpose. The original translations from the Telugu text used here were made by I. Narasaiah. He co-authored the preliminary reading on which the present paper draws freely.

⁸Published references to various versions of the set of stories which find their place here were once quite numerous: see for example OPPERT 1893, 464–74; RAUSCHENBUSCHCLOUGH 1899, 13–16; THURSTON and RANGACHARI 1909, 315–16, citing Mysore Census 1891; Siraj UL HASSAN 1920, 410–11; WHITEHEAD 1921, 127–34.

⁹Name and exact location are withheld from general publication.

¹⁰*Dappu*, a flat, single-skinned drum played with two unequal sticks, is the instrument primarily identified with Madigas. It is important both in their own cultural activity and in the provision of services for others.

¹¹Those historically associated with tapping toddy palms and selling the fermented sap. Here they have not been regarded as Untouchable and today are members of a large, influential, and, in part, wealthy caste.

unfamiliar to most: Washerman and Barber had been expected. Though such opening episodes are essentially about gathering an audience in preparation for the arrival of Jambava, they establish the inter-caste context and theme from the beginning.

Meanwhile the final stages of Jambava's own preparation and the ritualization of the event were completed at the gate of the house yard. Turmeric and pink patches representing the smallpox with which Yellamma is associated were applied to his legs, water poured around his feet, a coconut broken and vermillion (*kumkum*) applied to foreheads of the other participants, signalling their participation in worship. Decked in leaves of the neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*), preceded by the drummers, and with a canopy carried along behind him, Jambava then advanced out of the colony brandishing his cutlass and a heavy bamboo stick and dancing fiercely (*raudra*). Brahman, with book, spectacles, an elegant black stick, and his umbrella open against the sun, walked calmly along in the same procession.¹²

Themes and Format

The performers distinguished three puranas as making up their Gosangi Vesham. The first is the Adipurana (*ādipurāṇa*), dealing with origins, the second, the Shaktipurana, dealing with the feminine principle of force or energy (*sakti*), the Goddess and village goddesses, and the third, the Basavapurana,¹³ dealing with the significance of leather. Performance is continuous however. The three sections start in the order suggested but interweave as they are developed. Confrontation as a narrative theme is directly relevant mainly for the last: in the two preceding, Brahmans as such are significantly absent from the stories told. The Trimurthis — Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva — have their place in the Adipurana but it is, as will be seen, a subordinated one. The form throughout is, however, confrontation moderated by cooperation: Brahman facilitates Jambava's explanations from the beginning, respectfully asking him to explain himself and prompting the next stage of the narrative. Jambava intersperses his dialogue with songs, mostly with responses (*vanta*) from the musicians, and the *cindu* footwork.

¹²It has sometimes been thought that the performance would be a private affair for Madigas, carried on in their own colony. While it is likely that this has happened on occasion, it is not what the present research found. It is more possible to imagine performance as an open and licensed "ritual of rebellion" (GLUCKMAN 1954) in contexts of normal repression.

¹³Somanatha (1160–1240 CE) wrote a Basavapurana, one of the early Telugu classics, focused on the life of the Basaveshwara, the founder of the Virasaiva movement. The name Basava is also that of a bull sacred to Lord Shiva. In its early stages the movement challenged concepts of pollution and caste discrimination, and an historical link is possible despite the absence of reference to Basava in the Jamba Purana as recorded here (BROWN 1852, 606; ISHWARAN 1992, 26–30; SATYANARAYANA 1999, 340).

The songs are more or less relevant, more or less readily understood, sometimes subsequently explained. Brahman keeps mostly to dialogue and supporting action. In the observed performance but not in the published text, he was the more fluent performer, at times helping Jambava out with his own points and explanations. At the same time he was intermittently provocative. Jambava responded physically, once or twice chasing Brahman escaping from the performance site altogether. His response to the most offensive and outrageous of Jambava's assertions was to cry exaggeratedly, to the amusement of the audience. They also tricked each other on occasion, with acted humor relevant to their role. Brahman offered Jambava his fine scarf if he could catch it; but then threw it bundled into a ball into the air, in the opposite direction. Jambava got Brahman to bend before his seated self, as described below. He interacted with a young boy in a sketch about wanting to buy sweets as another family had done; this had been for their grandfather's death anniversary. "Grandfather, when will you die?" responded the boy. He enquired of his fellow Chindus about their performing of lady roles, and parodied the way it should be done. The performance ended, in typical yakshagana style, with *mangalam*, auspicious praise for the gods, and for the sponsors of the event performed by Brahman. The performers then returned as they had come, in procession to the Madiga settlement.

Adipurana

At the beginning of the text¹⁴ Jambava claims that he was sent to earth one night by Brahma, Vishnu, and Ishwara (Shiva). Almost immediately, in a song he proclaims himself as "born six months before the earth itself." Then there is a lotus in the waters and its flowers are producing fruits. Jambava cuts one open and Adishakti emerges, crowing and dancing like a peacock. She delivers three eggs. What follows expands and fills this out with a second and apparently different genesis narrative of the emergence from nothingness of the sound *Om* with lights flashing colors. Names are acquired and these names are the original god, Adidevudu (*ādidēvudu*). From it/him the waters formed and the lotus in the waters. And in the lotus, again six months before the birth of the earth, Jambava was born.

In the main development the precedence of Jambava is therefore boldly established. He is present at the origin of everything. Though he is going on to proclaim himself the grandfather (*tāta*) of Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu — the Trimurthis — he has from the beginning a separate identity distinguishing him from the gods.

¹⁴The summary that follows is based mainly on the published text of a three-hour performance (VENKATESWARLU 1997; CHARSLEY and NARASIAH 2004).



FIGURE 1: Jambava at a house in the Madiga colony applies base color for face using a mirror. Brahman to his left prepares his sacred thread. Harmonium. Ankle bells and ornaments on the ground.



FIGURE 2: Brahman making up, Komati behind him, Jambava to his right. Jambava is almost fully dressed including saris and neem leaves.



FIGURE 3: Jambava in the course of the performance, with full cowrie shell ornamentation, garland, bell, bamboo stick and cutlass, and smallpox (Yellamma-related) ornamentation of legs.

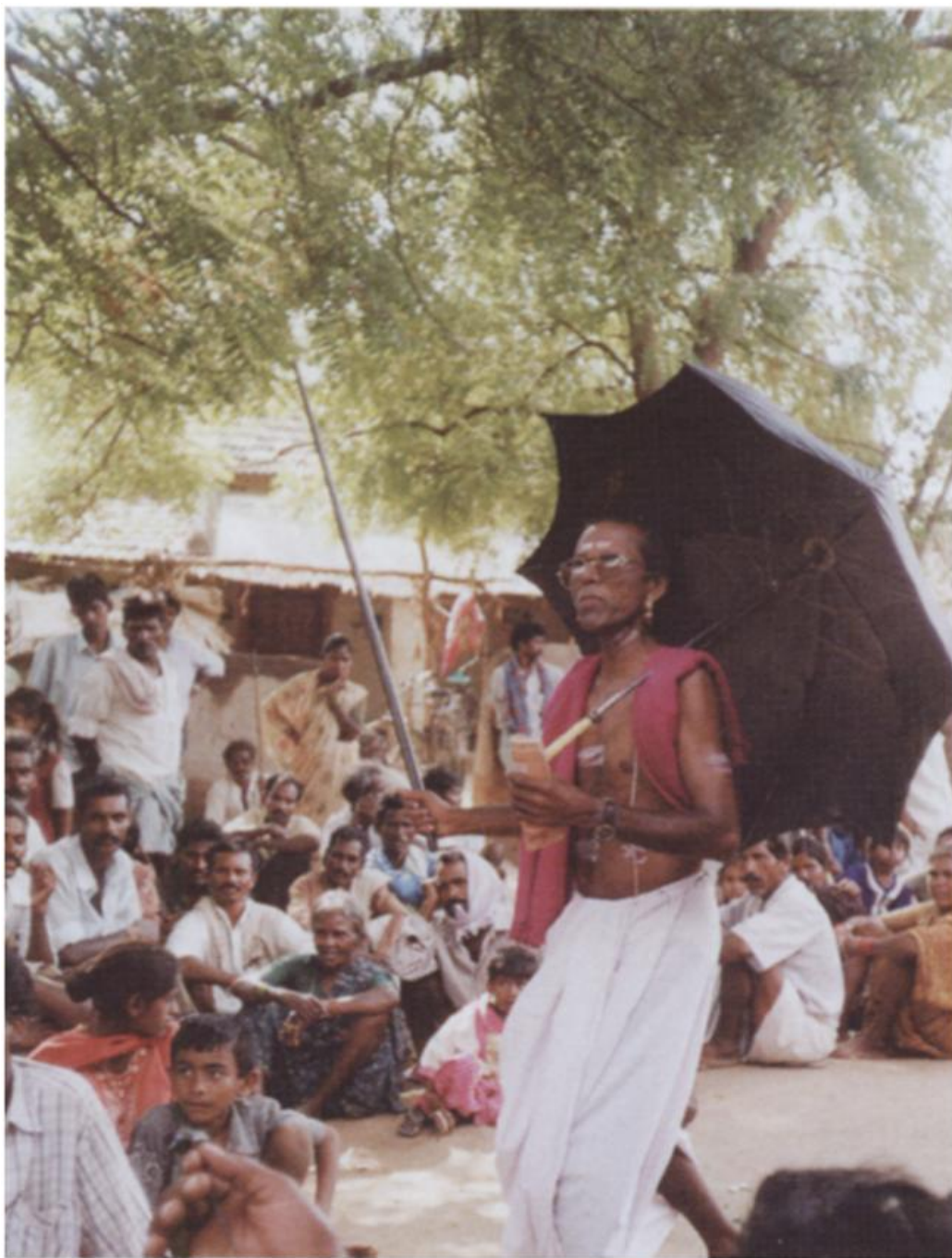


FIGURE 4: Brahman performing: umbrella, spectacles, shawl, book, fine black stick.



FIGURE 5: Chindu musicians and singers.



FIGURE 6: Brahman, Jambava, and Madiga drummers return down the street after the performance, back to the Madiga colony.

Though not carried systematically all through, a claim that Madigas recognize eighteen ages (*yugam*), as compared with Brahmans' four, provides the frame for ordering this and the following narratives. Their names are recited in the first example of the naming and listing which occurs throughout. It is one of the favored forms of learning — or performance skills — displayed repeatedly by Jambava. It was in the first age that the original god was born. Subsequently he is most often called Parabrahmasvarupam, which may be glossed as “the essential self-created spirit,” and he has super-anthropomorphic form: five faces, ten eyes, ten hands, and all the vedas in him. A lotus and other plants in the water were created in the second age. Jambava himself emerged from the water looking like a hairy animal and carrying out austerities (*tapas*), and this marked the end of the fourth age. In the fifth it was the creation of Adishakti who also, like Parabrahmasvarupam, had five faces and ten hands but also an extra eye (*palanetram*) in her forehead, which was capable of burning up whatever it blazed on. She had five names, stars on her tongue and mantras in her mouth, and a jewel granting all wishes (*cintāmaṇi*) in her navel. Again she is in the lotus but otherwise the story is now different and Jambava and Adishakti have not met.

In the form of a bee, however, she searched the lotus looking for someone else and found Jambava sleeping. Growing up, she tried to persuade him to have sex with her but he refused: he was her elder brother, born in the preceding age. Instead she should undertake austerities for the original god. By such means she would summon him to fulfil her desire. This was accomplished and, in the form of peacocks, she and he played in the waters. He impregnated her with three drops of his tears and she laid three eggs. From the eggs Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva were born.¹⁵ Providing for them in the watery world required an island and the building of a nest on it, and Adishesha, the original serpent, to guard them. From the shells remaining, the rest of the form, furniture, and living beings of the world were created. Their resonant names and vast numbers are impressively listed, arriving finally at Kamadhenu, the cow that provides unlimited milk — or perhaps anything that can be wished for; Kalpavriksham, the tree that is similarly bountiful with fruits; and Palasamudram, the ocean of milk the churning of which was to yield immortality for the gods. They were to provide sustenance for the newly born Trimurthis. At this point the purana of origination can be regarded as completed, with the Shaktipurana already grounded within it.

¹⁵MCCORMACK (1959, 123–24) reports a Virasaiva Devipurana from Karnataka which includes a similar narrative. Eggs, with varied contents and uses for their shells, are a major cosmogonic theme.

Shaktipurana

Jambava is still the *muni*, holy sage and adviser of the gods, in this next stage, but the narrative now goes beyond this to link him with his Madiga and other descendants and provide charters (MALINOWSKI 1926) for their relationships, privileges, and pains. The three young gods have grown up and Adishakti now wants sex from them. Though she claims to be only the mother of the eggs, hence their grandmother, they regard her as their own mother. They therefore refuse her and she seeks to kill them. They turn to Jambava for protection. His advice is to agree to her request but to ask her to bathe first. She will then remove her dangerous third eye before entering the water — the gods should seize it and use it to burn its owner herself up. They do as instructed and she is reduced to ash. From the ash Parabrahmasvarupam, who now re-enters the story to provide wives for the young gods, creates a new image of Adishakti. He divides it into five parts. From the head, chest, and navel he creates Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Parvati, as wives for Brahma, Vishnu, and Ishwara (Shiva) respectively. From the fourth part, two wives are created for Jambava, and from the last part Kali, not as a wife but to help the gods (*dēvata*) fight the anti-gods (*asura*) and demons (*rākṣasa*). She would do so in a succession of forms and would be worshipped and receive animal sacrifice under so many names: forty-three are listed in this text, most of them the names of village goddesses. The passage locates the wives of Jambava amongst the goddesses but without being goddesses themselves. Their clearest significance is that they express the relationship between the Madigas and their Chindu performers: the first wife is the ancestress of the former, the second wife of the latter.

Having created wives for the Trimurthis, the task then is to get them married. This necessitates jewellery, requiring the creation of precious metals for it. Vishwabrahma and other craftsmen are required to make it, and Jambava is to provide the leather bellows needed for melting the metal. Leather was however lacking: this is its first appearance in the narrative and it is noted that he did not have cows. Having given his word to provide the bellows nonetheless, a son, Yugamunindrudu, was born from the right side of his own stomach, to be killed by his own father so that his skin would provide the necessary material. Once killed and his skin — indeed his bones too — used for necessary implements, he still came back to life and cursed his father: “You will forget your austerities and will become a Chandala” — the puranic outcaste. Nobody would touch him. Eventually the curse was limited to five thousand years, but Jambava nevertheless cursed him in return: “You will be called Dakkali. You will beg for food in the houses of my descendants.” The episode is completed with the successful making of the jewellery and the creation of a Kummari (potter caste) to make the pots needed for the marriages.

This is a passage of immense significance for Madigas. It establishes the link with skin or leather, only it is not the skin of cattle but almost Jambava's own. It exemplifies the dependence of others on the leather he provides, which is to be the major theme of the last section of the performance. And it fixes another inter-caste relationship, that between Madigas and Dakkalis, another of their satellites. At its center is the rooting of untouchability, not in working with leather or even in anything to do with the cow, but in a human tragedy. Such generous pledging of help as Jambava displays and its potentially tragic consequences are a well-known spring of action and emotion in the epics and the rendition of stories from them in yakshagana: Lord Krishna, for instance, commits himself to avenge the spat-upon Gayodu in the popular Gayopakyanam. In yakshagana, however, ultimate tragedy is avoided through the powers of gods: here however, it is the outcome in mutual cursing amongst humans which is envisaged as having the direst of consequences for them and their everyday world. Curses are, in the universe of Hindu thought, neither in themselves wicked nor the historic fantasy that they are in contemporary Western thought. It is not a mistake, nor wickedness, nor is it portrayed as entrapment by the gods: it is a tragic consequence of a good man trying in extraordinary circumstances to do what is both necessary and right.

Basavapurana

It is the following episode that sets up a dangerous relationship between Jambava and the cow. The story now brings him into relation with the key source of the leather, dead cattle, indeed with the skinning of the dead Kamadhenu. It is framed in a way which avoids any implication that this in itself is other than a valued skill. From this Madiga perspective, the impending problem lies elsewhere, and blame will be firmly attached to a nonMadiga. Parvati and her husband were moving in the forest. Parvati injured herself and blood from the wound became a tree. At its foot a boy, Chennaiah, was born.¹⁶ The implication of his birth is that he is the child of Parvati, and quasi kinship with Jambava is established too. The gods (*dēvata*) told Chennaiah to address Jambava, "born six months before the birth of the earth," as grandfather (*tāta*). Chennaiah is first taken back with Parvati to Kailasam, Shiva's abode, to be the keeper there for Kamadhenu. He, however, forms a desire to taste her meat, at which she dies of sorrow in front of Lord Shiva. The gods are not up to the task of removing and cleaning the body. Chennaiah is therefore sent to fetch Jambava from his own place where he is sitting, high up and engaged in the worship of lingams, the symbol of Shiva.

¹⁶The observed performance offered a different mechanism, involving the dung of Kamadhenu and Parvati's shadow, but the effect was the same, a quasi son for Parvati.

Chennaiah means to call him: “Grandfather, come down!” but instead mispronounces the intention, saying instead “Grandfather Madiga come!”

The portents are bad: the disturbance has caused him to lose his lingams¹⁷ and to be called “Madiga.” He descends, interpreting events as the working of the curse of his Dakkali son. He opens his treasures and hands on to his Chindu son, Jihmamuni, a bell which Adishakti had given him. It is a conspicuous ornament worn by the Chindu playing Jambava in Gosangi Vesham. His Chindu son is to come twice a year to the houses of the Madigas to receive his dues. Jambava and Chennaiah return to Kailasam where he and the gods cut up the carcass. Chennaiah is to cook it for eating, but in the course of the cooking a piece falls from the pot. He picks it up, blows on it to clean it and pops it back. This is the offence: he has polluted it with his breath and the gods reject it: “It is for Jambava and his grandson.” By implication, the gods are ceasing to eat polluted beef; it is to be for those cursed with untouchability only, but the restriction is linked to the polluting of food, not to the sacredness of the living cow or danger from the dead one. Pollution as a phenomenon is not denied, but any understanding of the cow in its death as intrinsically dangerous is turned aside. Disaster hangs over the whole sequence of events and is expressed in a tirade of blame aimed at the unfortunate Chennaiah. Jambava proclaims him a Mala, the progenitor of the other main “Untouchable” caste of the region.

The impending end of the last age before the present age of ultimate degeneration, Kaliyugam, is signalled. The gods will withdraw, leaving him, says Jambava, helpless in the bad place to which they had summoned him. He begs from them the boon of the provision for his Madigas of paddy and other foods. He lists thirteen kinds of residue from harvesting and threshing, as well as other items that people are to give them annually. Thus the final element in the relationship of untouchability for the present age is set up. In it Madigas will continue to deal with the successors to Kamadhenu as they die;¹⁸ they will continue to have the beef to eat but will be regarded as polluted for doing so; and they will be provided with paddy and other means to life by those growing it. They will have a livelihood but its cost in pollution and status loss is not disguised.

¹⁷The worship of personal lingams, the symbol of Shiva, points to a link with Virasaivism. In a later re-capping of this incident, one particular lingam protecting his life is distinguished. This also fell down, but he appointed another son, Sangaiah, the progenitor of the Nulakachandaiah caste gurus, to protect it (VENKATESWARLU 1997, 29).

¹⁸Madigas do not scavenge other dead creatures, an altogether different activity.

Performance and the Goddess

Next we are taken into the world of war between the gods and the anti-gods and demons. Shankara (Shiva) is killing them but with the resulting problem that from every drop shed of their blood another opponent springs up. Adishakti reappears to provide a solution: she prevents the blood falling to earth by catching it on her tongue and drinking it. However, this blood drinking enrages her and she turns on the gods themselves. Jambava is recruited to pacify her. To carry out this great service he is presented with thirty-two badges of distinction or “honors” (*birudamu*) by the gods. Vishnu creates for him the distinctive Madiga drum (*dappu*); Shiva presents a tiger skin; Virabhadra the ankle bells (*gajjelu*) that all performers who dance wear; Shanmuka peacock feathers; and so on. These are more or less closely connected with performing and were displayed in the performance observed.¹⁹ Jambava, supported by his sons and his wives, pacifies the fury of Adishakti by his Gosangi Vesham and returns to his home, Jambalagiri.

Only now does Goddess Yellamma enter the narrative for the first time, in her Brahmanical form as Renuka, wife of the Brahman sage Jamadagni. She is destined to be killed at her husband’s behest by her son Parashurama. The focus is now on Chindus rather than Madigas. Renuka/Yellamma is represented as fleeing from her son to Jambalagiri and seeking Jambava’s protection. Parashurama, however, comes to the town, manages to find his mother and kills her. She becomes a demon and chases the people to kill them. Jambava therefore needs to protect his people from her but is unable to do it himself. He calls first on his guru, Rudramahamuni. He could not help, but his mention emphasizes yet again Jambava’s standing and piety. Likewise his first wife’s Madiga sons and his Dakkali son declared themselves unable to help. The Dakkali parried the request: his father having made him Untouchable, how could he possibly have that strength? Finally Chindu Jihmamuni, the son of his second wife, was asked. He accepted the task but on condition that all his father’s thirty-two honors received from the gods should be passed on to him. This was agreed and, so equipped, Jihmamuni and his wife Sridevasalani danced before Renuka and finally she was appeased. Yellamma — as she is now named in the text — blessed the couple and gave Jihmamuni seven gifts of her own ornaments. His wife was to perform Yellamma Vesham and they were to take it round people’s houses every year. In return, they would receive offerings from the people.

The text appears then to revert to the perhaps older story which preceded this Renuka episode. Chindu Jihmamuni is again being given performance instructions

¹⁹Make-up, costuming, and accoutrements are analyzed in detail by REDDY and HARISCHANDRA (2002).

but now by Parabrahmaswarupa and the other gods. Yellamma is not referred to again until the very end of the performance. Taking up the earlier story, the Chindus are to perform for Jambava's people and to take round with them the honors Jambava had handed on to them. There should be no marriage between Madigas and Chindus. The Dakkali son receives instructions too: he is to beg in the houses of Madigas and to live to the east of them. Five Jetty castes, attached to Madigas, Malas, Toddy Tappers, Weavers, and Washermen — apparently descended from those to whom the falling drops of blood mentioned above gave rise—are also called for instruction. They are to make the people happy with their performances, except perhaps for the Madiga Jettis who are to be guards.²⁰

Learning, Caste Schemes, and the Challenge to Brahmanism

The Shakti purana theme has been completed and the stories of originations (*Adipurana*) are about to be with one short section grounding links with pastoral Gollas (VENKATESWARLU 1997, 20).²¹ Jambava's claims to superior knowledge of caste and genealogy come to the fore. Only the Basavapurana theme remains to be finally developed. Cattle and leather are emphasized as the source of Madigas' importance for others, simultaneously as the source of problems for themselves. The latter is identified as essentially Brahmanical and is challenged. This is the theme that comes to dominate the last part of the performance.

The first major demonstration of superior knowledge here is the listing of castes in three separate schemes. These start with strong quasi-Brahmanic reference but move into the immediately experienced caste universe of the region, before taking off finally, after immense displays of virtuoso listing, into an imaginative assertion of Madiga superiority. The beginning is a scheme which Jambava represents as set out by Vyasa, the classic "arranger" of Brahmanical lore for the present Kaliyugam. The three "Twice-born" varnas of the well-known Brahmanical scheme of four, or five, lead the listing, but it then continues with eighteen more. They are named with Brahmanic terms first, each then equated with a contemporary and locally familiar name: for example Lingadharaka (those wearing lingams) are Jangams, Gorakshaka (cow protectors) are Gollas, Nartaka (dancers) are Bhogams, Matanga are Madigas, and Chandala are Malas. The orthodox fourth varna term, "Shudra," does not appear;

²⁰These would be examples of satellite castes: Gouda Jettis are indeed today the tellers of the Toddy Tappers' caste myth in the region, but other Jettis are not currently known.

²¹Relationships with Gollas — often keen to be known nowadays as Yadavas — are found in a variety of contexts. For the village performance, a major and essential item of costume, the *gajjela lagu*, shorts with bells attached, were borrowed from Yadavas locally.

Madigas and Malas are not placed at the end of the list; and there is no division for “Untouchables.” The second listing gives striking expression to the caste-constellation concept (SINGH 1969). Seventeen major divisions are shown as made up of one hundred and forty-two sub-groups and, in one case, a sub-sub-group. Brahmans are still put first, with ten kinds distinguished by their specialized activities: performing rituals, working as village heads and accountants, narrating vedas, and so on. Some of the names at each level correspond with the first scheme, but the two lists are very partially consistent. The third scheme leaves Brahmanic categorizations entirely behind, setting out minor or satellite castes which thirty-three major castes have attached to them. Brahmans are now mentioned in third place, with Vipravinodulu, a known performing group, attached to them. All but two are shown with one satellite only. Gollas are shown with three, and when Jambava arrives at his own Madigas he sets off on a fanciful stream of dependants and the dependants of dependants. It starts with the by now familiar Dakkali and continues for ten levels beneath them. As a flight of listing fancy and a flourish of greatness in the published text, it is magnificent; in the observed performance, however, none of this was even attempted.

The theme of caste knowledge and the relationships of Madigas and other castes does not end here. Two further strands are woven together, one concerning puranic relationships of origins and genealogy — another Brahmanical sphere of knowledge to be contested — the other representing the importance of Madigas’ leather products for people of all castes. Relationships with Gollas lead the first strand: the idea that Lord Krishna was a Golla rather than — the usual Brahmanic version — only brought up by pastoralists (O’FLAHERTY 1975, 204–13) leads into genealogical issues. The Madiga version has Jambava giving his daughter, Jambavathi, to Krishna, making him the Madiga’s son-in-law. The son of Jambavathi and Krishna, Sambudu, then married Lakshana, daughter of Dhuryodhana, the Kaurava king in the Mahabharata.²² The extended and contentious debate refers to inter-caste marriages, mixed descent, and anomalous births. Jambava uses it to ridicule Brahman ideas of proper descent and any radical separation between Brahmans and Madigas.

Don’t say that you are superior and Madigas are inferiors. Oh fool! Do you know who was superior and who was inferior in the past? Don’t talk without knowing the past! Oh Brahman, you are the son of a donkey. Brahmans are the slaves of other castes. ... To whom was Vyasa born? Was he born to a Madiga or to a king? ... Tell me who are bastards, Brahmans or Madigas? (VENKATESWARLU 1997, 28).

Brahman bounces back with protests and counter-assertions. The text runs on in sharp banter and mutual abuse. Sexual morals and practices — whether it is Brahmans

²²This is the subject of Lakshana Parinayam, a yakshagana which is a favorite of Madigas.

or Madigas who were born to prostitutes (*lanja*); who practise abortion to hide sexual irregularities; who refuse remarriage to child widows — these and more are brought into vigorous contention.

Madigas' identification with leather is the last strand running through the final section of the performance. The dependence on them of other castes as leather users is argued, with song and acting, culminating in a final mocking of Brahmanical notions of leather as impure. Even Reddy landlords, Jambava asserts, though they will not touch Madigas, use the footwear made by them. Others depend on their leather for their traditional callings: Gouds use a leather sling made by Madigas to enable them to climb their toddy trees; Bhogams as dancers use it as skins for their drums; Washermen (*sākali*) as blinkers for their donkeys. Even Brahmins, when they draw water for their daily bath, must come into contact with leather. But not nowadays, responds Brahman: today we press the button on an electric motor. Ah, Jambava answers, but the belt on the motor is prepared by Madigas. "Everything in the world can only work with the help of Madigas" (VENKATESWARLU 1997, 34). Mingled with this are direct challenges to Untouchability. Brahman: "Hey, you son of a dog, don't touch me!" Jambava: "Hey, I touched you — you are impure!" He rebukes Brahman for calling him "Untouchable" and educates him in the work of Sri Virabrahman, a popular seventeenth-century saint who denounced ideas of pollution and Untouchability.²³

The published text ends with the acting out of a scene between Jambava as a contemporary village Madiga and Brahman as a would-be customer for his chappal repair services. Brahman asked him to mend his chappal; Jambava denied that Madigas do such work any more. Brahman tried to remind him that he wanted him to fix the propitious time for his son's marriage.²⁴ Jambava denied it: they are knowledgeable too and can fix it for themselves. Brahman appealed to his good nature and kicked the chappal to be mended over to him. In the performance this was a symbolic chappal, a stick with a thread tied round it: his own potentially polluting leather chappals remained firmly on his feet. Though the represented insult was supposed to anger Jambava, it also cued a word-play song proclaiming the central importance of footwear for life and for Goddess Yellamma herself. He then distracted Brahman with talk of Madiga marriage customs and his son's wedding before asking him to try the repaired chappal. This necessitated his bending, only to be teased for bending before a Madiga. "Yes, yes! That is how you pay the respect that everyone offers to Madigas. Bend down again and repair your own footwear" (VENKATESWARLU 1997, 35). This was too

²³Sri Virabrahman, popularly known as Brahmanagaru, and his doctrines live on as a center for pilgrimage and one of the most popular subjects for yakshaganas and other dramatic genres in Andhra Pradesh.

²⁴That Madigas have the service of Brahmins in this respect is taken for granted.

much: Brahman announced that he was going to Kashi, otherwise Varanasi, the holy city of Hindu pilgrimage and death on the Ganges (PARRY 1994). He enacted his going, finally overtly complicit in the undermining of Brahman ideas, values, and even dignity. He comes to a river; his chappals will be soaked; the water is rising; he will carry them in his hands; the water has reached to his shoulders, to his head. So finally Brahman is carrying his leather footwear on his head. He demonstrates where the real priority lies, not in issues of purity and pollution but in keeping one's chappals dry. In the performance, though the action was over with this final discomfiture of Brahman, it was he who led the final singing of praise to the gods and gave a concluding speech. In the past they used to perform Jamba Purana for the Madigas, he said. In return they would receive donations. But now these people from Hyderabad had come to watch their performance. God had sent these people from the city to help them. All Gods are the same: Adam, Eve, Allah, Rama, Krishna, all are the same. People from different places worship the God with different names. Finally, everyone set off back whence they had come, to the Madiga settlement for the working out of the "help" which was to be provided.

CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined the performance of a living caste purana and the light it throws on its "Untouchable" owners placing of themselves in the world. It lives in the sense of being still performed, if probably less frequently than in the past, and in a dynamic adjusting of its legacy of narrative, song, and issues to current circumstances. The account here has shown how the performance is framed as a confrontation between the "Untouchable" and the Brahman, seeking to undermine the perceived claims to superiority of the latter in learning, in descent, and in purity. It challenges notions of purity and pollution in terms of which the owners of the purana as traditional leatherworkers, associating these ideas particularly with Brahmins, know themselves to be devalued. Its claim, however, is deeper and more radical. What does not appear is any assertion of primeval kinship with Brahmins, so common a theme in previous discussion of "Untouchable myths," nor with the gods. It is precedence rather than coequality which is claimed, calling on cosmogonic traditions emphasizing the female Shakti and making secondary and junior the great male gods of contemporary Hinduism. This, it should be noted, is not claimed on behalf of "Untouchables" as a whole but for the particular caste. The other major and rival "Untouchables" caste or constellation of the region, the Malas, are provided in the purana with an altogether different ancestry in the person of a quasi-son of Goddess

Parvati, , with none of the primeval quality asserted for Madigas.

If precedence is the fundamental theme here, and the challenging of Brahman hegemony a contemporary relevance with strong local roots, the practical importance of Madigas for others is the second major element. It has two parts to it, leather and performance. Dependence of others on Madigas as the source of leather goods is established cosmologically in the provision, as so great a cost to themselves, of bellows for furnaces, making metal-working possible, and in relationships with Visvakarmas in recognition of this. The relationship with pastoral Gollas, at least in the region in question, is the major practical though less immediately telling example claimed. Relationships with Toddy Tappers and a mass of other secondary claims mentioned are becoming ever more tenuous with the decline in practical dependence on leather in recent times. This appears to be the point of greatest vulnerability in the puranic tradition here: as leather becomes increasingly residual in the historical experience even of Madigas themselves, its significance as a mythological concern is likely to be fading. A third theme is then performance signified in the Gosangi role not merely as entertainment, though there is certainly an element of this, but in relation to the goddess, her pacifying, and worship. The purana, as has been seen, represents the power of Gosangi performance as having been passed on from the ancestor of the Madiga cluster as a whole to one branch, the Chindus, but as regards performing more widely, Madigas have remained active in their distinctive style of drumming and, since the mid-twentieth century, often in yakshagana performance. More recently they have also been active in contemporary performing arts as promoted by the cultural wings of parties of the left. Their identity as performing people therefore remains significant and, like the purana itself, alive to current change.

It is these aspects together which make the embraceable caste identity at odds with sheerly negative conceptions of “the Untouchable,” asserting instead a multi-stranded tradition of which people can be proud. The problematic aspects of Madiga identity are not ignored, but there is no reason to see them as, for Madigas, what the purana is primarily about. Exclusion, Untouchability, and poverty are accounted for, but contextualized within powerfully positive elements. The ability to move and skin dead cattle is given a forcefully positive evaluation. The eating of beef is not represented as a mistake. Its confinement to certain castes is the consequence of a change of heart by the gods which at once secured a source of nourishment but also set apart those benefiting from it. A mistake had been made. It was not, however, to eat beef but to pollute it for others by blowing on a piece thrown back into the pot. Even this somewhat tangential mistake had been made not by a Madiga but by the progenitor of their rivals, the Malas.

It was in any case not this, nor the gods, which caused Madigas downfall. Jambava

is caught up in an epic tragedy. It is the tragedy of his Dakkali son, born to be killed by his father to provide the leather needed for the bellows, cursing him in return, and the curse working out in exclusion through the intervention of Parvati's Mala "son." Analogies with the fate of the Pandavas at the root of the *Mahabharata* epic and of Rama in *Ramayana*, both well known here through yakshagana and other performance genres, come to mind. Most particularly it resonates with the fate of the ever-faithful King Harischandra, condemned to serve an "Untouchable" master in the burial ground and the subject of one of the most popular and moving dramas of all the many performed today in Andhra Pradesh.²⁵

For Madigas and Dakkalis the cursing was, it will be recalled, mutual, resulting in the Untouchability of Madigas for nearly all others, and the Untouchability of their Dakkali "sons" even for themselves. What seems therefore a neat package of pollution, infringement, and exclusion from a Brahmanical perspective is presented in the purana in an altogether different light. It can be said to be deconstructed as long as this is not understood as conceding a priority to the orthodox upper caste perspective which it allows us to see beyond. To see it as an answer to outsiders' questions, such as how Indian "Untouchables" could have been so generally passive in the face of the discrimination and exploitation imposed upon them (MOORE 1978; FREEMAN 1986), or whether they accept the values in terms of which they are themselves devalued (MOFFATT 1979; DELIÈGE 1989, 1993; MOSSE 1994), is to miss the opportunity here offered to understand a perspective which is different but, as so often in anthropology, not in quite the ways expected. It is, in a Geertzian spirit, a chance to analyse a complex and changing story that people tell themselves about themselves. A start to this major task has been attempted here.

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²⁵See BRIGGS (1953, 44–49) and PARRY (1994, 25–26).

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